

# Mental Retardation

## FACT SHEET

### What is mental retardation?

Mental retardation is a term used when there are limits to a person's ability to learn at an expected level and function in daily life. Levels of mental retardation vary greatly in children – from a very slight problem to a very severe problem. Children with mental retardation might have a hard time letting others know their wants and needs, and taking care of themselves. Mental retardation could cause a child to learn and develop more slowly than other children of the same age. It could take longer for a child with mental retardation to learn to speak, walk, dress, or eat without help, and they could have trouble learning in school.

Mental retardation can be caused by a problem that starts any time before a child turns 18 years old – even before birth. It can be caused by injury, disease, or a problem in the brain. For many children, the cause of their mental retardation is not known. Some of the most common known causes of mental retardation – like Down syndrome, fetal alcohol syndrome, fragile X syndrome, genetic conditions, birth defects, and infections – happen before birth. Others happen while a baby is being born or soon after birth. Still other causes of mental retardation do not occur until a child is older; these might include serious head injury, stroke, or certain infections.

### What are some of the signs of mental retardation?

Usually, the more severe the degree of mental retardation, the earlier the signs can be noticed. However, it might still be hard to tell how young children will be affected later in life.

There are many signs of mental retardation. For example, children with mental retardation may:

- sit up, crawl, or walk later than other children
- learn to talk later, or have trouble speaking
- find it hard to remember things
- have trouble understanding social rules
- have trouble seeing the results of their actions
- have trouble solving problems

### What can I do if my child is diagnosed with mental retardation?

You are doing the right thing now – talking your child's doctor or nurse. If you or your doctor think there could be a problem, you can take your child to see a developmental pediatrician or other specialist, and you can contact your local early intervention agency (for children under 3) or public school (for children 3 and older). To find out who to speak to in your area, you can contact the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities by logging on to **[www.nichcy.org/states.htm](http://www.nichcy.org/states.htm)** or calling **1-800-695-0285**. In addition, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has links to information for families (**[www.cdc.gov/ncbddd](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd)**).

To help your child reach his or her full potential, it is very important to get help for him or her as early as possible!

[www.cdc.gov/actearly](http://www.cdc.gov/actearly)



Learn the Signs. Act Early.